

8. After the War

The war ended in the summer of 1945, but I had lived through the May 1945 uprising in Prague with a great deal of agitation. The Americans were in Pilsen, but they were not allowed to advance to help Prague – it was to be liberated instead by the Red Army.

In the months following the German capitulation there was much confusion and there were many misunderstandings. It so happened that based on some denunciation I was visited by two soldiers who told me in bad Czech (it turned out later on that they were Carpathian Russians) that if I wouldn't go with them, they had orders to shoot me. Needless to say, I went with them. They led me from the Municipal House along Příkopy to Mikulanská Street number 13 and into an office that, by happenstance, used to be general Bílý's flat.

A soldier who was sitting there told me: "I'm captain Vrána (Crow)," although I doubt that was his real name. He started shouting at me: "Look at you, how elegant you are, you capitalist swine!" I told him not to take such a familiar tone with me and he replied: "Just you wait, we will show you! We'll put you in a cellar and beat you up. Then you will see if I can take a familiar tone with you."

I said again: "I'm warning you – you're making a terrible mistake."

He searched me and in my pocket he found an identity card that said I was a member of the National Council. He said: "This might help you somewhat."

I took it back from him, tore it in two pieces and said: "I don't need a piece of rag to help me. I will help myself."

He went on swearing and said: "You will see!"

I told him: "I'd like to help you."

He shouted: "No, you will do as I say. You have to follow my orders."

"No way, Sir! I've already heard this before. This was at the Gestapo and I told them that I didn't have to do anything – except to die when God wills it. I don't have to do anything, except to die."

"Then you will die soon," he shouted. And he went on in this manner.

"Look, I really don't have to do anything. But I would like to help you because this will cause you a lot of trouble. You should call the commander of your military intelligence unit."

He asked me with surprise: "How do you know we have a military intelligence unit?"

I said: "Everyone knows that every army has military intelligence. Any I know that the commander is no longer General Moravec who was in London during the war, but Lieutenant

Colonel Bartík¹. You can call him or you can call the President and you can tell them what you are up to.”

This Vrána finally called his adjutant and whispered something to him. Then he told me: “Mr. Vašata, you will sign this document where you declare that you haven’t been mistreated during the interrogation.”

“But I do feel like I was mistreated. I refuse to sign something like that.”

“You have to sign it!” he said.

“I’m warning you that I don’t have to do anything at all,” I said resolutely.

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Now I’d like to explain why I was arrested in the first place. During the war, the Gestapo appointed a so called *Treuhänder*, a German administrator, who acted as a faithful henchman of the occupiers. My *Treuhänder* was the wife of a Gestapo officer. Her name was Isolde Seben. She spoke a bit of Czech and also English. It turned out that I was arrested because they had found my rationing coupons for clothes on her. Vrána wanted to know how my coupons were found on some German woman.

I told him that she had been my *Treuhänder*. I explained to him: “When they took someone’s business, they put a *Treuhänder* there. Since they didn’t have anyone who could actually run the business, they might have left the former owner in charge for a time. But I have no idea how my rationing coupons got to this woman.”

“And where did you buy this suit?” Vrána asked me and I could tell how much he hated me.

“I never used coupons to buy anything, I’m not going to tell you where I bought this suit, but I bought three sets. They cost me two hundred thousand crowns. I’m not going to tell you where I got them because the seller might get in trouble. I never respected the war economy based on rationing, I bought everything on the black market. But this is no concern to the military police!”

I told him I wouldn’t sign any statement unless I dictate it myself. At first he agreed to this so I started dictating about how two soldiers came to me and told me they have orders to shoot me if I didn’t come with them.

He stopped me and said: “No, I don’t want that, I want you to say that you haven’t been mistreated.”

“But I have!” I exclaimed.

¹ Josef Bartík (1897-1968), member of the Czechoslovak Legion in Italy, general, intelligence officer of the general staff, head of military and political intelligence service of the Czechoslovak Ministry of War in London. Imprisoned from 1948 to 1953.

He started threatening me: "You will hear about me!"

"And so will you!" I told him.

"How do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean what I say. I will hear about you it seems, but you will hear about me."

"Alright then, let's leave it be as if nothing happened, as if this whole case never existed."

I countered: "No, this is only the beginning of this case."

Then he told me that a lieutenant would escort me home, but I replied: "No, I was brought here by two soldiers and two soldiers will bring me back home so that the other half of Prague sees how you escort an honest citizen around town. You have yet to learn how to treat free people of a free country." I ended up leaving on my own.

I came back to the Municipal House and a meeting of the National Socialist Party was just taking place there. There were several deputies and there was also Krajina, who was acting as the secretary general. I told them all: "I'm not going to give you any details at this point, but I want to dictate a letter to the President as the supreme commander of the Czechoslovak army: 'Mr. President, today at 6.30 pm, I was being led across Prague by two soldiers like some whore.'" I wrote to him about the interrogation and I asked him to bring some order to the army. Whoever was responsible for this didn't belong in the army; he should be herding cows.

Some three or four months later, I received a call from the restaurant downstairs that two officers had come to see me. I asked them to come upstairs, but they said I had to go see them downstairs. I told them that I didn't have to do anything and that I would be coming down in an hour. They said that they wouldn't wait so I told them to go home. In fact, an hour later I found them in my office.

My office was a large room and there were two armchairs. They sat in them wearing officer's hats. I came in and asked them: "Where do you think you are, lying about in my armchairs. And can't you salute when someone enters the room? My name is Vařata."

They got up and said: "We only ask for a small favor, we would like you to sign this."

"What is it?" I asked.

"You don't even need to read it." They averred.

"I have never signed anything without reading it first," I told them. It said that I didn't feel I had been mistreated and so on. I said: "But I do feel I've been mistreated. I am deeply offended as a taxpayer and I've complained to the President."

They said: "We need this for our Minister." I answered: "And the Minister needs it for the President because I've written to the President. Wait, I will show you the letter." I showed them a copy of the letter.

"How can you write to the President that you were led like a whore?" they asked.

"Because they did!"

They cried: "You have to sign this."

I became angry: "First of all, don't beat your fist on the table. This table is mine. And open the door. That door belongs to the city of Prague and I don't want to break it as I'm throwing you out!"

They were outraged about how I treated them, so I explained to them: "The normal way would be to call me, tell me this is the military police, we need something of you, would you mind coming here. I would ask when I should come and I would go there."

"But you can't act like this."

"Don't lecture me on what I can and can't do and get out!" And I threw them out.

About a month later I was visited by two other men. They waited for me in the lobby. They already knew who they were dealing with and they said: "Mr. Vařata, we would like to ask you, if you wouldn't mind..."

But I interrupted them: "That must be the thing I've been asked to sign once before."

They said: "Yes. The two gentlemen from before didn't know who they were dealing with, but we do, so if you wouldn't mind signing it. We need it for the Minister."

I answered: "And the Minister needs it for the President and I won't sign anything for you!"

"What do you want then?" they asked me.

"I want this lout who interrogated me out of Prague. He has nothing to do here. He should be herding cows somewhere."

"So what are we to do?"

"I don't want anything from you. I want Mr. President to act, it's his duty."

Another month later they called me from the President's office to ask me if it would be alright with me if the man would be sent somewhere to the borderlands. And that was the end of the whole affair. I didn't sign anything and he was packed off to the borderlands. Such a man shouldn't have held an official post. This is no way to treat people.

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I could talk at length about how one should treat others. I have a rich experience of it from my work or from when I was a deputy for the National Socialist Party. I didn't belong to any political party before the war but having lived through the war and seen what I had seen, I felt like one couldn't just stand by. I saw how the communists were spreading their tentacles everywhere – they had to be confronted. And because I was an experienced businessman, the national socialists wanted me in the National Council. That's why I ran for office on their ticket.

I had my office in the Smíchov district in the National Council building. I met a number of people there and had lots of new responsibilities. There were many things that needed to be done in the fields of trade and business. But I enjoyed my work – I felt that my contribution was worth it. Business was running smoothly in the restaurants in the Municipal House and at Václavské náměstí. I had reliable colleagues everywhere.

As a deputy and a member of the National Council, I became responsible for trade and businesses. I was also sitting on the housing committee in charge of administering the property confiscated from the Germans. In all my functions I took great care that the rule of law was respected. I wrote an editorial for the newspaper *Svobodné slovo* that was published on the 7th of September 1945 where I said the following about the situation of small businesses and tradesmen: "...the mistakes that took place in the days following the May revolution when national administrations were brought into businesses whose owners were neither German, Hungarian, or collaborators are being redressed. This action draws support from the circular of the Ministry of Interior no. 3988/1945 from the 26th of July that was sent by the National Council in Prague to all Regional National Councils and District Committees.

According to the circular, the government was to avoid unnecessary use 'unless the allegations prove founded so as to send the accused before the people's tribunal in accordance with the President's retribution act, the accused cannot be held in custody and his property cannot be subject to forced national administration...' The officer in charge of administering confiscated property should be above all aware of that expertise is key: We don't want to be giving bakeries to photographers or paint shops to dentists. The government won't abandon this principle and if anyone believes that it will, they will do just as badly as the man who was seeking to gain control of the liqueur company in Carlsbad, and when he couldn't, he asked instead for a factory making bras. These were difficult times – the communists were starting to take liberties and they thought they could do anything.

I would like to mention an event that happened in May 1946. On 27 May, there was a great commotion in the Municipal House and at the National Council of which I was a member at the time. They called Vařata around ten times from the President's office and they kept asking whether I was going to be home that evening. I assured them that I would be at home and at that point, an official told me that the President would be coming to the Municipal House that evening. I didn't know whether he was coming for a reception or to a concert, but naturally I was ready in my dinner jacket an hour before his arrival to welcome the President on his first visit to the Municipal House. The President arrived and he asked me, "Is there a room where we

could speak in private?" I told him that I lived in the building and he accepted my invitation to come to our apartment.

I have to admit that my knees were shaking with trepidation during the whole journey in the lift and up the stairs. I also told myself that I had to be careful to speak properly. When we settled down in our apartment, the President turned to me and said, "I came to thank you for everything you did during the war." I was surprised. I told the President that he didn't have to thank me for anything because I wouldn't ever do anything like that in the future again. I had joined the Resistance as a mere foot soldier and if I had gained more responsibilities after the assassination of Heydrich, I carried them out because I felt it was my duty.

The President interrupted me and asked me why I wouldn't ever do it again. I answered truthfully because I'd lived through a lot of fear. The President laughed and told me, "I will admit to you that I lived through a lot of fear during the London air raids despite living 15 miles away in Putney, but you are the first person to admit to me that they were scared during the Occupation. I have met many people who told me that they weren't scared of being taken to the Gestapo."

To that I answered – I had already regained confidence and my knees were not shaking any more – emphatically, "Mr. President, you would do well to avoid these people!"

The President then told me, "I have a surprise for you. All the honors are given out by the Minister of National Defense on my orders, but I would like to give it to you personally. That's why I'd like you to come to my office to receive your honor from me directly."

I answered, "Mr. President, I cannot accept this honor because it belongs to those who died in the struggle against Nazism."

To that the President answered, "But only a few people acted as bravely as you did during the Occupation. I hear there were many traitors."

At that moment, our conversation became heated. To his remark about traitors, I reacted in this way: "Mr. President, there were no traitors in the Czech nation. The nation as a whole behaved honorably and if there were any traitors, their numbers were so small that it's not even worth considering them as a percentage. Mr. President, if 2% were traitors then it would be too much." But then I quickly corrected myself and added, "Not even that. A maximum of 1% if it is even possible to express it as a percentage. I will tell it to you in simple terms: whenever I needed something but didn't have any one of my colleagues close by, I could stop any Czech speaking person in the street and ask them to help me. Some people would tell me they couldn't help because they had a wife and children and were afraid. Or they would accept the task without questioning why or how. In short, the nation behaved honorably."

Because the President expressed some doubts, I told him, "The nation behaved honorably up until 27 April 1945." The President asked me why I mentioned this date. I answered, "Because on 27 April, the Communists started to join the Resistance. Around this time, the true

Resistance fighters already knew that there was no need for any further action and they were ceasing their activities, and only then the Communists became active!”

Seeing Beneš surprised, I told him that the Communists started joining the Resistance in 1939 and that General Bílý told me that we had to maintain contact with them because Communists are capable of any kind of betrayal, and in case of such betrayal, they could use it for political gain. Personally, I must say that in those four years of being a part of the Resistance, I had never met a Communist let alone a Communist Resistance fighter (not counting Fučík for whose lunches I arranged on a regular basis).

Because the President was again surprised and appreciated my admission that I wouldn't ever join the Resistance again because I was afraid, I used the opportunity to tell him, “Mr. President, if you think that there were many traitors and the nation is rotten, then it is obvious that you were given wrong information and I have an explanation for that: I think that you are either surrounded by people who came with you from London or came from the concentration camps. These people know nothing of how people behaved at home.”

I was interrupted by Jaromír Smutný, who said in a rather arrogant way, “Mr. Vašata, I should warn you that you are speaking to the President of the Republic.” To that I answered, “Doctor, I may surprise you by my intelligence despite being a simple restaurateur. You probably think that I take Dr. Beneš for a solicitor in Slaný but you will be surprised, I am well aware that I am speaking with the President of the Republic.

Both the President and his wife laughed at this, and Mrs. Beneš said to me, “Mr. Smutný isn't a Doctor. If you want to address him by his title, his last one is Ambassador.”

The President then asked me about various mutual acquaintances and finally told me, “Not least I must thank you for saving my brother, Vojta's, life.” I answered that it was the natural thing to do in the circumstances and the President answered, “I know that he took a road that many others did but today I have the opportunity for saving him.”

About half an hour later, the President excused himself saying that he still had to attend a concert. He added, “I would like to talk with you about the domestic resistance because you have completely different views to the people who have been informing me up until this point.”

I answered, “Mr. President, it is because I am speaking to you as an independent man who will never ask anything of you. If somebody informs you that so and so was a traitor, then they probably want to take their place, and I can assure you that I will never want anything of you. I'm an independent citizen of the luckily free, democratic Czechoslovak Republic and that's enough for me.”

The President smiled and repeated that he would like to speak with me again. He asked me then and there when I would have time. “Mr. President”, I answered, “as a simple citizen, I will always make time for the President, whether it is at 4am or 3pm. Whenever your Secretary calls me, I will be at the Castle in 15 minutes at your disposition.”

This meeting never happened despite the fact that I visited the President four or five times about the case of our colleague, Peřura, from the National Defense who was dragged off to the USSR by the Red Army. Jan Masaryk², whom I also asked for help in this case told me, "Leave me alone – the Soviets won't even answer our calls."

I also saw the President three or four times as a member of the National Council when we went to introduce ourselves as the National Government. The President always spoke to me last and told me, "We still have something to talk about Mr. Vařata." I always told him that I am at his disposal at any time but when this happened the last time, it was clear to me that the President, and above all his entourage, didn't want to talk about the wartime National Defense any more.

When he repeated this to me in July 1947, I answered directly, "Mr. President, I don't think we'll be talking about anything because you don't like what I tell you. Otherwise you would have called me long ago, so we could talk about it in private."

I would have liked to have told the President how gallantly Dr. Jan Levit acted and how the National Defense was based in his practice with the help of his colleagues and nurses Louisa and Aneřka - that in itself was a miracle. The fact that the Committee of the National Defense was able to meet there twice a day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon – that in itself was showed how bravely Dr. Levit acted.

I would have also liked to have told the President how bravely our women acted, our Czech women. Only some of the names that come to mind of those who willingly took on the work of someone who had been captured by the Gestapo or who had to leave the country: Mařenka Hajřmanov, Aniřka Zeltnerov, Ludmila Nekendeyov, her sister Hanica, Mrs. Mařinov, Mrs. Truhlrov, Luisa Snřkov, Aneřka from Dr. Levit's practice, Mrs. Maruřka Prařanov from Poliřka, Mrs. Aniřka Novkov, the wife of the pilot Frantiřek Novk, and last but not least my wife Linda. I would have liked to have told him all of that, but it was not meant to be.

I found myself unexpectedly in high politics at the end of August 1947. At that time, my large apartment on the third floor of the Municipal House became the site of a confidential meeting between the leadership of the National Socialist Party and the non-Communist part of the high-ranking officers from our army. The general staff were informed of the danger of post-war Czechoslovakia becoming communist. The meeting was cordial. The officers came in their best uniforms. This was of course no conspiracy although the Communist party interpreted it as such later on.

² Jan Masaryk (1886-1948), diplomat and politician, minister of foreign affairs after the war.